



D*death as a Form of Becoming: the Muslim Imagery of Death and Necropolitics*

Masood Ashraf Raja, Ph.D.
Florida State University
rajam6_98@yahoo.com

Towards the end of his essay “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe discusses the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide bombers. Reading this particular human behavior, using the Hegelian and Batalian philosophy, Mbembe opines:

There is no doubt that in the case of the suicide bomber, the sacrifice consists of the spectacular putting to death of the self, of becoming his or her own victim (self-sacrifice). The self-sacrifice proceeds to take power over his or her death and to approach it head-on. This power may be derived from their belief that the destruction of one’s own body does not affect the continuity of the being. Death, here, achieves the character of a transgression. But unlike crucifixion, it has no expiatory dimension. It is not related to the Hegelian paradigms of prestige or recognition. Does this imply that death occurs here as pure annihilation and nothingness, excess and scandal (p.38)?

I think Mbembe’s reading of the death of the suicide bombers makes perfect sense within the philosophical matrix of his choice. While he does seem to suggest that death in this case could mean something within the ideology of continual of life after death, on the whole, however, this death has no “expiatory dimension.” I think the conclusions would be strikingly different if the same phenomenon is examined within its own ideological arena. In this brief study, I intend to read the literal death—and attendant murders—of the suicide bombers within its own ideological matrix, namely the Muslim imagery of “non” death. I think this exercise would allow us to look at the same phenomenon in a different light. Important also is a need to study these phenomena from the place of the other—from the very eyes of the person who straps bombs to his/her body, and to walk into the so-called valley of death.

Let us first try to re-phrase Mbembe’s supposition about the suicide bombers: Does their death mean something? The question is



not does their death accomplish something, but rather, does it mean something? And, of course, within Mbembe's chosen philosophical paradigms, his conclusion is impeccable.

I will deal with the subject in a two-pronged approach: First, I would like to briefly explain the discursive framework of the Muslim imagery of death, and secondly, I will relate this particular analysis to a short story published in Pakistan in a woman's pulp fiction magazine¹. The idea is to explain, first, the Muslim imagery of a special kind of "non" death, and then to trace its representation in the most commonly available literature found in one Muslim country; for the texts we read impact the way we perceive the world around us.

What culminates in the physical death and literal explosion of the suicide bomber comes about with the combination of material causes—sociopolitical²—and a deeply ingrained ideology of death. It is this discursive matrix that constitutes the eventual becoming of that most lethal and stupefying agent of death, the suicide bomber. As stated above, the death of a suicide bomber is a special kind of death, or to be more precise, a "non" death, for which the pertinent word in Arabic—as opposed to the generic *ajl*—is *shahadaat*. There are two important ways in which this particular concept is generated and perpetuated: through the Muslim sacred text, the Qur'an, and the Muslim cultural production, literature, poetry, history etc. Let us first look at the way the concept is explained at the source, the well-spring of Muslim imagery, the Qur'an³:

And say not of those
Who are slain in the way
Of Allah: "They are dead."
Nay, they are living
Though ye perceive [it] not. (2:154)

Think not of those
Who are slain in Allah's way
As dead. Nay, they live,
Finding their sustenance
From their Lord.
They rejoice in the Bounty
Provided by Allah:
And with regard to those
Left behind, who have not
Yet joined them [in their bliss],
The [martyrs] glory in the fact
That on them is no fear,



Nor have they [cause to] grieve⁴. (3:169-170)
And if you are slain, or die,
In the way of Allah, forgiveness and mercy
Mercy from Allah are far better
Than all they [the unbelievers] could amass. (3:157)

Those who leave their homes
In the cause of Allah,
And are then slain or die,—
On them will Allah bestow verily
A good provision.
Verily He will admit them
To a place with which
They shall be well pleased:
For Allah is All-Knowing
Most Forbearing. (22:58-59)

There are three important aspects of these citations; all of them are relevant to the question of suicide bombers: The continuance of a martyr's life after death (a mastery of time), their place of glory in the eyes of God, and the rewards of their sacrifice for their loved ones. Let us look at these in a slightly more detailed way.

From the first two verses it becomes quite evident that the Shaheed, the martyr, achieves a special status through his corporeal death, for he is, as the verses state, not dead. The second verse also clarifies that the Shaheed earns special favors through his sacrifice both for himself and also for his family, including freedom from fear and humiliation. Finally the Shaheed is admitted into a blessed place by an all knowing God, which implies that all his sins are forgiven, for an all knowing God—the editors of this particular edition of the Qur'an explain this in a footnote—would not make such a promise if the Shaheed's previous actions would have a bearing on his place in the eyes of God.

Thus, this “non” death, if looked at from the place of the other, suddenly becomes the most cherished deaths of all, for it not only absolves its subject of all his sins, but also promises a better hereafter for his loved ones. I must point out that, despite various sectarian and geographical interpretations of the Qur'an, the meaning of the term Shahadat is quite universal. This death without death, where the dead can speak from the other side of death is what forms the ideological framework for all the Jihad movements, whether they are Hamas's foot-soldiers, or Black Widows from Chechnya. This concept of death as a from of becoming is linked inextricably to the concept of Jihad,



which I am using here in its most literal sense: struggle against oppression, power, and injustice⁵.

I would, however, dwell a little longer on one particular sentence from the previously cited verses, the one that speaks of “Those who leave their homes/In the cause of Allah, /And are then slain or die.” This particular Shahaadat involves movement, especially from the place of one’s abode to the place of one’s death, and this is highly important. This suggests that the Muslim hero does not enter the valley of death to kill his enemies from a safe distance, but rather, the Muslim warrior enters the site of his unbecoming to die, to become eternal, for Shahaadat is a passage to a place between life and death, an absolute form of being beyond death, beyond judgment; hence a total transcendence of one’s material existence. So, theoretically, a Muslim would look for such places of his/her unbecoming, for it is imperative for a Muslim to move to the place of death in aid of other Muslims who might be under attack or under a tyrannical government. While there may not be any material advantages to this movement, there are considerable advantages after death—a life after death being one of them, hence adding meaning to this kind of death. It is in this context of life beyond death that the actions of a suicide bomber are transformed from an excess to a meaningful action.

Like all other monotheistic religions, Islam also has a long history of scholarly interpretation of the sacred text. Modernity has not been able to shake the Muslim beliefs in Qur’an as the final, untarnished word of God. Even in today’s world, according to the rules of Qur’anic interpretation laid down by the early Muslim scholars, the Qur’an is the first source to be consulted in the matters of religious interpretation. Hence the Qur’an still functions as the ideological source for almost all the contemporary questions of interpretation. In a nutshell, to interpret any modern problem, the religious scholars will first look for something analogous in the Qur’an. Finding none, they will move on to *Sunnah* (tradition of the prophet); then to certain historical verdicts of the scholars; and if none of the above provides a suitable answer, only then would they use *Qiyas*, their personal judgment.

The second important aspect of the Muslim imagery is the wide array of Muslim cultural production. I will here deal with the works of only one poet to provide a symptomatic instance of this cultural production: a few verses of the great Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal⁶. Iqbal wrote extensively in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a subject of British India. Educated in the East as well as the West, he was quite familiar with western philosophy, and his



poetry is often written as a response to the western view of the world.

What he writes, therefore, comes from a deep well-spring of the socio-cultural imagery of Islam, including also a nostalgic rearward gaze to the Muslims of the past. In Iqbal's view, the state of the Muslim world—especially under colonial rule—was a direct consequence of the loss of their earlier ideals and heritage, especially the replacement of an action-oriented ideology with fatalistic, messianic interpretations of the sacred texts. According to Iqbal's interpretation of the Qur'an, a true life for a Muslim is a life of action. Here is how he describes it:

Islam believes in the efficacy of well directed action;
hence the standpoint of Islam must be described as
melioristic—the ultimate presupposition and justifica-
tion of all human effort at scientific discovery and so-
cial progress. . . . The highest stage of man's ethical
progress is reached when he becomes absolutely free
from fear and grief (p. 85).

What is clearly evident in the above explanation of the spirit of Islam is Iqbal's emphasis on action. To him Islam does not encourage a messianic approach. In the same work Iqbal also discusses the importance of individual freedom as opposed to the nostalgic reliance on the past. Note also that to Iqbal, the highest degree of human accomplishment is freedom from fear and grief, which takes us back to the verses quoted from the Qur'an that promise the Shaheed absolute freedom from fear and grief. What the Qur'an stipulates, Iqbal puts in verse and considering his times—when he and so many other poets read their works in public *musharia's*⁷—he popularizes the concept of Shahaadat as a way of accomplishing a meaningful “non”death.

I will now, briefly, cite a few of Iqbal's verses about the concept of Shahaadat and the role of a Muslim hero. Iqbal's hero is a man of action and not just of words, which clearly explains Iqbal's disdain for the fatalistic Sufism. Here are a few verses⁸ of Iqbal regarding Shahaadat:

You have created this world from my blood and flesh
What is a Shaheed's reward? An everlasting glory!
Shahaadat is the ultimate goal of a Muslim
Not spoils of war or empire building
They [the martyrs] consider it [death] an opening to their
hearts
For death is not death in their eyes.

Like silk is a Muslim, amongst his friends



In the clash of truth and falsehood—like steel
A Muslim's heart is clean of deceit and despair
And he is fearless against the power of kings.
(pp. 53, 307, 397, 507)

These verses cover only one aspect of Iqbal's poetry—namely that of a Muslim's place in an unjust world—and should not, therefore, be taken as symptomatic of all his works. On the whole, Iqbal's poetry—despite its Islamic emphasis—is quite universal in its scope and he is, in the words of one of his American admirers “a voice from the East that found a common denominator with the West and helped build the universal community that tolerates all differences in race, in creed, in language,” (Douglas, x). With this brief caveat, I will now attempt to discuss the above-cited verses.

The first two verses/stanzas, as the translation indicates, are about the place of *Shahaadat* in the Muslim imagery. What is important to note is that Iqbal's poetic representation of *Shahaadat* and *Shaheed* is not much different from the Qur'anic verses previously cited. The first verse clearly suggests that a *Shaheed* does not look for worldly rewards, for he is promised eternal glory in the eyes of God, which is the most cherished reward. The second set of verses juxtaposes the spiritual reward with the material advantages of a war. For *Shaheeds*, worldly gains do not mean much, but what does matter is the ability to transcend life through death to reach a state of “non”death, a new becoming as promised by God. I have quoted the last two verses simply to prove that *Shahaadat*—unlike the way most orientalist interpret it—is not a fatalistic gesture. It has to be read in conjunction with the Muslim concept of *Jihad*, the struggle.

The last two verses, therefore, explain a Muslim's state of being in the world: just and loving with his friends, hard and warlike amongst his enemies. Also within his own community, a Muslim hero is honest and upright and intrepid against the power of kings, which we can now read as being fearless against power. Iqbal, and so many other poets and writers, popularize the notion of an active, complex, and tragic Muslim hero who is willing to die for his cause if it is necessary. Also, the same imagery emphasizes that such a gesture should not be motivated by worldly gains, but should be geared toward the rewards already promised to a *Shaheed*.

It is this combination of Qur'anic sanction and cultural imagery of the *Mujahid* and a *Shaheed* that plays the most important discursive role in the Muslim political imagery; therefore, it is necessary to study it within this light.



Iqbal is not the only one in Muslim history who writes about the concept of Shahaadat and the role of the Shaheed. There is a large corpus of heroic literature—encompassing over fourteen centuries of Islam—that deals with the same subject and, regardless of the geographic, historical or temporal differences, the basic meaning of the concept—though the practices may vary—stays quite consistent. The same imagery of Shahaadat can be clearly seen in the language of Iraqi resistance—both Sunni and Shi’ite—in the anti-occupation movement in Iraq. Of course, the ideology has been altered in terms of its material unfolding—the kidnappings and the beheadings—but despite the modifications caused by the changing structure of the violence used by the occupiers, the discursive matrix employed to mobilize the fighters has not altered much. Being a *Shaheed* still means the same: defeating death and achieving God’s blessing.

With this brief analysis of the ideology of *Shahaadat* in the words of one poet, I will now move on to analyze a novella published in Urdu in a woman’s magazine in Pakistan. The magazine that published this particular novella is entitled *Khawateen Digest (Women’s Digest)*. Published monthly in Karachi, Pakistan, most of its editorial board is comprised of women, and almost all the stories, non-fiction essays, articles, and advertisements are written by and for women. Here are some statistics about these digests—of which *Khawateen Digest* is only one—as cited by Kamran Asdar Ali:

According to advertising expenditure data, the number of magazines published in Pakistan grew from 214 in 1993 to 406 in 2000. The majority were women’s magazines, in Urdu. The same sources document that about seven percent of the adult population of 141.5 million read these magazines. Women’s digests such as *Pakeeza* or *Dosheeza* have monthly circulations of 60,000 copies reaching an average of 300,000 adult readers, far more than the first run for the most respectable literary publications. Moreover, they have helped create and consolidate a whole industry of female writers, sketch artists, and designers who make a living through the publication of these digests (p. 130).

This story is written by Nighat Seema, a regular contributor to various women’s magazines, and it is entitled “*Jis dhajse koi maqatal me.n gayaa...*.” Before I summarize the plot and attempt an analysis of the story, I must deal with the title, for the titles, like the prefaces, are always instructive in terms of leading us into a story but also giving us, especially in this case, a wide array of significance based



upon past histories and mythologies—the ideologies of their own production. The titles in Urdu often have a metonymic value for invoking a certain time, concept, practice, or myth in Islamic history.

First, let us investigate the all-important translation. The title is taken from one of the poems of renowned Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz. It is, in fact, the first *Misra* of one of the *She'rs* from one of his famous *Ghazals*⁹. The whole *She'r* is as follows:

*Jis dhaj se koi maqtal me.n gayaa vo shaaan salaamat
rahtii hai*

Ye jaan to aani jaanii hai is jaa.N kii to koi baat
nahii.N¹⁰

A translation of this verse:

It is the splendor of one's entry into the
maqtal that lasts forever

For life is ephemeral and not much to worry about.

Before I attempt to unravel the implied meanings of this verse, I would like to point out that Faiz was not an especially devout Muslim poet; in fact, he was a Marxist and even won—to the great consternation of his government—a Lenin Award. However, his poetry in general, and this verse in particular, is clearly saturated with the cultural imagery of martyrdom upon which I have briefly touched. *Maqtal* is one Urdu/Persian word in the first verse that needs special attention, for if we could understand this word and what it signifies, a whole new understanding of the highly complex phenomenon of suicide bombing can be developed.

Maqtal is one of the many Persian words adopted in the Urdu language, but the word itself came to the Persian from the Arabic. Here, I will only mention the Arabic root of the word, but dwell slightly longer on its Persian etymology. In Arabic, the root verb is *Katala*, meaning to kill. The Persian inflections are as follows:

Qat'l: To kill

Maqtool: The Murdered/the killed

Qaatil: Killer/Murderer

Maqtal: The Place of one's Killing/death/unbecoming.

With this brief introduction to this instructive word, let us now tackle Faiz's verse, which is the title of the story I intend to discuss. The first verse here clearly implies that the person, whose splendor is immortal, is not entering the battlefield to kill. His battlefield is a *Maqtal*, a place of his own unbecoming, hence the Muslim hero enters the *Maqtal* to die, and the manner of his death decides how many honors he receives.



This image of a Muslim hero entering the field of battle, a place of his own corporeal unbecoming, is a consistent trope in almost all of Muslim literature. The literal incidence for this particular trope, other than the ideological context suggested in the Qur'an, is also the literal death in the history of Imam Hussain, in Karbala. According to all historical accounts, the Imam had gone to Karbala—knowing that he was outnumbered, and that he would die for his principles, and his death, as a deathless death—is celebrated and remembered by Shi'ites all over the world. Both ideological, literal, and metaphoric explanations of the verse signify that the Muslim hero enters the place of death to die, and that what matters is how honorably he can die, for life itself does not matter much.

To a reader of Urdu popular fiction, even before a single page has been read, the story creates a horizon of expectation—a certain possibility of a tragic narrative of honorable “non” death. And the story does not disappoint the reader. Here is a brief summary of the plot. The story is set in contemporary London and relates the lives of five Muslim students, at the outset of the current war in Iraq. Considering that this novella was published in January, 2004, the immediacy of the real-life war and its representation in popular fiction is quite instructive in itself. Fatima, from Pakistan, her fiancé Umer Sittar, Zenab Najadi, probably from an Arab country, Abdul Majid, a Palestinian, and Aziz, from Iraq, are the five characters brought together in the story because their university is in London, and also because they are all Muslims. These are the ideal hybrid subjects who are located in the West and have seen the western way of life from within; they are not the so-called fundamentalists who, in Mr. Bush's words, “hate our freedoms.” The story traces the impact of the current war, and of other situations in the world related to Islam and Muslims, upon the lives of these characters. The story begins with the following words of Fatima Jabbar, the protagonist of the story¹¹:

There used to be a statue of a horseman with a lance on the dome of the golden palace in Baghdad. It is said that his lance would always point to the direction from where an enemy was about to attack Baghdad, but the horseman could not predict the Tartar storm that was unleashed from the snow-clad peaks of the steppes. . . But Saddam Hussain knew about the coming storm, then why did he not take any defensive measures. . . ?

“Yes Saddam Hussain knew everything, but what could have he done? Didn't he cooperate with the arms



inspectors? Didn't he allow them to enter his country? Didn't he destroy most of his military arsenal? What else could have he done?" said the Palestinian, Abdul Majid Hashmi, to Fatima Jabbar.

Well, he could have done something. They could have at least died fighting, as a Muslim nation. . .

Well, you should not talk much about that Fatima Jabbar, you Pakistani! What have you all done as a Muslim nation? You should not even attempt to say anything; you should all first look into your hearts," retorted Zaniab Najadi. (Seema, p. 61)...

This first passage is quite instructive. The story starts with the most recent invasion of Baghdad, but its historical matrix, or the ghost of another history, is the experience of the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Mongols in twelfth century. From the very outset, the fall of Baghdad this time is not a separate event. It is, rather, the same repeated history. The current politics of the Muslim world also come into play immediately. Zainab Najadi's interruption of Fatima is very specific to the current war and Pakistan's involvement in the war on terror. Even though these students are friends, they are also candid about their views of one another in terms of their involvement in the affairs of the Muslim in a larger context.

Later we learn that Aziz, the Iraqi, has lost all his family during the fall of Baghdad, as their apartment building was hit by a missile—collateral damage in the current vocabulary of global politics. But for Aziz, there is nothing collateral about it; all that matters is that he has lost his family because of the U.S. bombing. During the story we also meet Fatima's fiancé who is studying in London, and who contemplates the degraded state of Muslims in the world's power scheme. Abdul Majid, the Palestinian, is almost a stock character, for he represents the Palestinian of Muslim cultural imagination, the wronged, the lost, and the enraged. In a nutshell, by the middle of the story Abdul Majid decides to join the *Fidayeen* in Palestine. He is actually happy to do so, for now he has a chance to fight for his people's freedom. Here is how he thinks of his situation in verse:

I am looking for a heart
 In which the happiness of my People dwells
 Warriors have no hearts, and my people
 Are born without peace and freedom
 And live and die without them.
 We wanted to speak for ourselves
 Our voices got stuck in our throats



We are the people on whom
The powerful learn their plusses and minuses
Listen, glass eyes do not grow a vision.

Meanwhile, Fatima's fiancé, Umar, who had been meeting with a religious scholar in America, decides to join the *Jihad* in the Palestinian occupied territories, another *maqtal*. This is a good example of a Muslim hero leaving everything to enter the maqtal. In a posthumous letter to Fatima, he explains his reasons:

Fatima. . . You will get this letter after my *Shahaadat*. How did this all happen? Do you remember when Abdul Majid explained attacks by the *Fidayeen* to us? I wondered how these people end their own lives with their own hands. What does one feel after having decided to blow up oneself? How does that moment feel when one's whole being has been reduced to a few pieces of flesh . . .? These people were free of the fear of death. According to them, there was no other way; it was the height of hopelessness, but this hopelessness was not saddening or tiring; instead, it was imbued with love, life, passion. Death carried so much of the color of life that it baffled me... their death contained a dance of life. I saw death proud, and learned the etiquette of dying. . . It is a Muslim's duty to fight in the name of Allah, and the national borders are no barriers to this quest. I could not do anything for the Afghans, or for the Kashmiries, but I can, with Abdul Majid, join the suicide bombers to kill a few Jews in the *Jihad* being fought on the land of Palestine (p. 106-107).

This is the letter from beyond that unsettles the reader, and gives voice to death. Note the romanticized concept of death, of *Shahaadat*. This fictional situation is, of course, mimetic, modeled after the real-life events in which the suicide bombers video-tape their last messages to their families before their death. The modern technology delivers their message to their loved ones, after they have died. Note also that Umar in this letter does explain his material reason for joining the suicide bombers, but his actions are governed more by the romantic notion of *Shahaadat* itself, and the concept of Muslim struggle against the oppressors of Muslims anywhere in the world. This passage, therefore, becomes emblematic of the Muslim imagery of death that I am attempting to explain. Note that Umar does not hope to accomplish much, nor is he entering the *Maqtal* to kill his enemies from a safe distance. No, his sole consolation, as crude and sickening as it may



sound, is to kill a “few Jews” in the process of his own unbecoming. Note also that death is not a desperate attempt at accomplishing something, but rather an act in which the writer sees a “dance of life,” which would give meaning to such a death. Within the Muslim imagery of *Shahaadat*, the mere act, the courting of death, even for a lost cause, makes his action the most meaningful, for he has finally acted—action being the instructive word here.

But our story does not end here. We still have to see what the bereaved heroine would do, for she is the very woman who is being rescued in Afghanistan and Iraq by the U.S. troops. What would Fatima do? An important question, for it creates yet another new version of Muslim imagery of death and struggle that now works across gender; modernity has now entered the Muslim imagery of death. As expected, Fatima is grief-stricken and she blames her fiancé for having left her without prior knowledge of his plans. She is heart-broken and calls her family. But in the end, instead of returning to her country and living a life of relative safety, she chooses to enter yet another *Maqatal*. In her action, the gender barrier is breached, and the struggle now becomes gender-neutral, with the woman becoming a part of the larger imagery of *Shahaadat* in a war-torn world.

The story ends:

She rested her back against the headboard of her bed and closed her eyes. Since Umar’s death, this was the first time she felt light and peaceful. She saw angels descending from heaven to take her and Aziz to heaven. She saw Umar and Abdul Majid waiting for them in heaven, which brought a beautiful smile to her lips. Her face became radiant with a spiritual light because of the decision she had made just a few moments ago—the decision to join the . . . *Jihad* movement in Iraq (p. 109).

Let us recapitulate Mbembe’s argument about the classical notion of heroism as opposed to what he calls the logic of martyrdom:

How are we to interpret this manner of spilling blood in which death is not simply that which is *my own*, but always goes hand in hand with the death of the other? How does it differ from death inflicted by a tank or a missile, in a context in which the cost of my survival is calculated in terms of my capacity and readiness to kill someone else/ In the logic of martyrdom the will to die is fused with the willingness to take the enemy with you, that is, with closing the



door on the possibility of lie for everyone. This logic seems contrary to another one, which consists in wishing to impose death on others while preserving one's own life. . . . In such a case, triumph develops precisely from the possibility of being there when the others (in this case the enemy) are no longer there. Such is the logic of heroism as classically understood: to execute others by holding one's own death at a distance (p. 37).

The last sentence is important to understand the U.S. military policies in Iraq and elsewhere. Wherever it becomes evident that there would be a loss of American lives involved, the policy makers have always relied on the technique of killing from a distance, which, incidentally has added the words such as “smart bombs,” “precision bombing,” and “collateral damage” to our war vocabulary. The Muslim response, and Mbembe explains it brilliantly, is generated through the necessity of gaining proximity to the potential target through camouflage, and dissimulation. But that is not the whole cause. As the story relates, the hero enters the *Maqatal*—named death-worlds by Mbembe—to die. In this way, then, death itself becomes a passage to a “non”death, which within the context of Muslim imagery is a meaningful action in itself.

This brings me to the last stage of my brief analysis, namely, keeping in mind this imagery of death, is the current U.S. policy of preemption likely to succeed? If one were to keep in mind the potential of the U.S. and its Allies to go to war, the question could be answered in the affirmative, just like a simple mathematical equation. There is no way that the powers that hold so much in terms of technologies of violence could lose this war, but there is one glaring flaw in this theory. Current U.S. policies generate the very causes that increase the kinds of resistance we are seeing in Iraq. This policy of pre-emption creates places of death, the *Maqtals*, wherever forces are employed, which, in turn, launches a chain of responses. As the number of *Maqtals* increases, so does the motivation for the potential fighters to leave their homes and comfortable lives, and offer their lives to gain a state of “non”death at the place of death.

Most of the characters of our story, all middle class Muslims who are well on their way to fulfill their bourgeois promise of success, give up the comfort of their lives to enter the place of death. This is a work of fiction, but there are a whole range of practical realities hidden behind it. And what is being produced in the cultural domain is always Janus-faced; it captures the realities



of everyday life and also creates the imagery of a future yet to come.

While any intervention into the Islamic world is bound to fail, especially if it is aimed at altering the ideological narrative of the Muslim culture, the war-like interventionist policies do not seem to be of much help either. Islam has proven surprisingly resilient as a political, as well as an ideological force, despite the centuries of colonialism, Soviet control of central Asia, and the economic stranglehold of the West. The failure of U.S.-initiated westernization of the Shah's Iran, and its replacement by a revolution led by the clergy is a classic example of the failure of any long-term western venture into changing the cultural mores of a particular Islamic culture.

While I do not have room here to outline the root causes of this resistance to a western dictated modernity—for Islam is modern in its own way—I must point out that the current U.S. policy is doomed to end in a spectacular failure. As this policy relies on brute force to solve the global terrorist crisis, it will produce, instead, a more violent response to its own project, especially since there is already a potent ideological matrix available for the mobilization of the willing Muslims against this new onslaught. In the long run, the West must learn to be more sensitive to the demands of the Muslim world, including creating space for Muslims within an interest-driven global economy. When there are no more *Maqtals*, there will be less of an imperative to encourage people to enter a place of death to seek martyrdom. Instead of perpetuating the death-worlds, a policy that ensures reduction of such places has more chance of success in the long run. The cultural imagery of death in Islam did not quickly come to be.

It is, rather, sanctified by the most sacred texts of Islam, and has over thousands of years of cultural production to provide it its framework. This imagery of *Shahaadat* can never be undone by a more powerful propaganda, or threats of sanction or death. The only way it can be reduced is by making the world a place where a devout Muslim can live in peace without having to sacrifice his or her religious principles, and where there are no places that call upon a Muslim to perform his or her duty of dying in the way of God. The current cultural studies enterprise has progressed tremendously in trying to understand the ways of life of the periphery; it is time now to also focus on the ways of dying in the Muslim world. For death, in this case, has the power to impact all life around it.



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Notes

- ¹ These monthly journals are called Digests. For a detailed description of these journals and their publication details, consult Kamran Asdar Ali's "Pulp Fiction: Reading Pakistani Domesticity." *Social Text*: 22.1 2004. pp.123-145.
- ² For a detailed anthropological study of Palestinian suicide bombers read Ghassan Hage's "Comes a Time we are all Enthusiasm: Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exigophobia." *Public Culture*: 15(1):65-89.
- ³ I am taking the liberty of quoting from the Qur'an with the due knowledge of the textual and historical context of these verses. Any attempt to cite these verses without a knowledge of their textual/historical context would be inherently flawed and is used only by anti-Islamic polemicists.
- ⁴ Here the editors of this particular translation of the Qur'an, all renowned Qur'anic scholars, add the following note to this particular verse:
The martyrs not only rejoice at the bliss they have themselves attained. The dear ones left behind are in their thoughts:
it is a part of their glory that they have saved their dear ones from fear, sorrow, humiliation, and grief in this life, even before they come to share in the glories of the hereafter (p.193).
- ⁵ I am using Roxane Euben's definition of the term in her essay "The New Manicheans." *Theory & Event*: 5:4, 2002.
- Jihad is often, but somewhat inaccurately, translated as "holy war." There is however, a very different word in Arabic for war: it is "harb"; and the word for fighting is not jihad but "qital." The word jihad is actually derived from the verb, jahada which means "to exert," "to struggle" or "to strive."



Jihad thus literally means exerting one's utmost power or ability in striving toward a worthy goal or struggling against what is proscribed, and when qualified by the phrase *fi sabil allah*, jihad refers to struggle or striving in the path of God.

⁶ For a detailed study of Iqbal and his works, see *Poet philosopher of Pakistan*. Hafeez Malik, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

⁷ My Translation

⁸ For a detailed explanation on conventions of Urdu poetry, especially Ghazal, see Frances Pritchett's *Nets of awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

⁹ The complete *ghazal* is available at <<http://www.urdupoetry.com/faiz23.html>>

¹⁰ All references to the story, when cited or paraphrased, are in my translation.

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